Delivering the Sound, For a Price

By HANS FANTEL
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Our seasonal mini-survey of standouts among current sound equipment now moves into elite categories.

This doesn't mean blatantly expensive models. Far from it. Just equipment that – regardless of price – is about as good as any.

We'll leave aside those pinnacles of engineering that attain arcane refinement at incommensurate cost.

Such pushing of limits may be admirable in the abstract and appreciated by perfectionists. But many listeners find that technical and monetary extravagance do not markedly enhance their musical pleasure.

Therefore these listings concentrate on components that achieve outstanding quality within the bounds of fiscal reason.

The rationale for this approach is that separate components are more easily designed to best fulfill their specific tasks.

Among such separate units, Adcom has come up with an unusual design. Its Model GTP-500II ($600) is a radio tuner that also contains the controls and preamplifier stages for a separate power amplifier.

As for the latter, Adcom offers several choices with different power ratings from 60 to 200 watts per channel (wpc).

A practical and cost-effective combination with splendid overall performance would be the GTP-500II combined with Adcom's GFA-545 power amplifier ($500, 100 wpc).

Other commendable combinations of tuners and amplifiers include NAD's Model 4300 tuner ($499) with the Model 3400 amplifier ($799, 100 wpc), Denon's TU-660 tuner ($330) with the PMA-1060 amplifier ($600, 105 wpc), Yamaha's TX-540Ti tuner with the AX-900U amplifier ($749, 130 wpc) and Proton's AT-670 tuner ($400) with the AM-656 amplifier ($700, 60 wpc), whose unusual circuitry allows it to exceed its rated wattage by a factor of four for brief peak passages.

In remote locations where FM reception is difficult, listeners may opt for such ultra-effective tuners as Onkyo's Integra T-9090II ($750), Pioneer's Elite F-91 or Yamaha's TX-2000 ($749) in conjunction with matching amplifiers by the same companies.

Design practices for top-rank CD players are in a state of flux, with some firms embracing the new one-bit or bitstream technology while others stick with traditional methods of digital decoding.

At the leading edge of the latter is Meridian's new Model 206 CD player – a British product making its American debut.

This design is based on patented techniques devised by Robert Stuart, who has emerged in recent years as a leading talent in British audio engineering.

This unit offers a fluid, rounded sound and a naturalness of timbre that has, at least so far, often eluded the digital medium.

Listeners who have not been altogether happy with CDs may find their ambivalence resolved by this player.

The $1,650 price tag should be weighed against the cost of far more expensive players that sound no better.

The rapid evolution of digital technology has also produced a large group of lower-priced CD players coming remarkably close to the best.

Among them are the Philips CD-840 ($599) and Harman-Kardon's HD-7600 ($699), both one-bit models, and multi-bit models like the Denon DCD-1560 ($650) the Yamaha CDX-920Ti ($699), Adcom's GCD-575 ($600) and Sony's CDP-X55ES ($900), which features a 45-bit decoder along with a host of operating conveniences.

Buyers of blue-chip audio presumably pick a speaker by its sound alone, regardless of price.

Equipment

It is possible to spend upward of $80,000 for a pair of speakers, but speakers selling in the $5,000 to $10,000 range often sound as good or better.

Those in quest of good value as well as good sound might focus on a different price range and listen to the KEF 105/3 ($3,500), the MB-Quart 990MCS ($2,700), the Thiel CS 3.5 ($2,650), the Allison Acoustics IC-10 ($2,300), the Mordaunt-Short 442 ($2,900) or the omnidirectional Ohm 4XO ($2,500).

Unless you crave seismic sound with lots of basso profundo, you might find happiness even with less costly speakers as long as they speak musical truth.

Promising candidates include the PSB Stratus ($1,400), the Vandersteen Model 2Ci ($1,195), the Boston Acoustics T1030, the a/d/s/ Model M9/90 and the Mirage 760 - the last three all listing at $1,000 a pair.

To round out a system of this caliber with a suitable tape deck, you might try DAT (Digital Audio Tape). A DAT deck won't play conventional cassettes, but the sound from the tape will be as good as the sound from CDs.

Sony's DTC-700 ($900) and Denon's DTR-2000 ($1,000) are prime choices.

If the utmost fidelity in copying records or broadcasts is your main goal (rather than playing prerecorded cassettes), DAT is the way to go.

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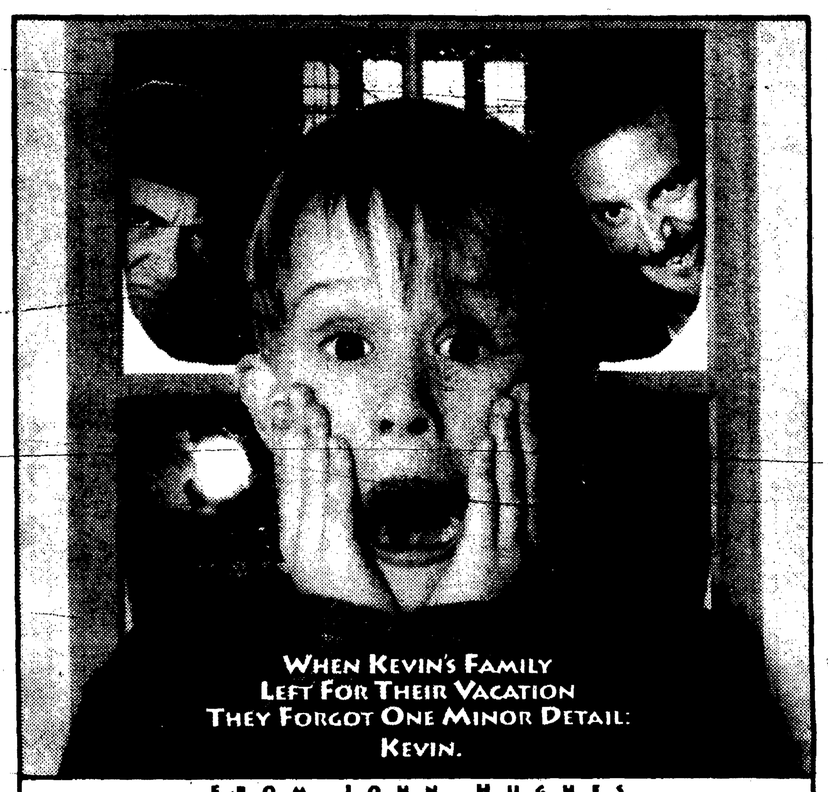

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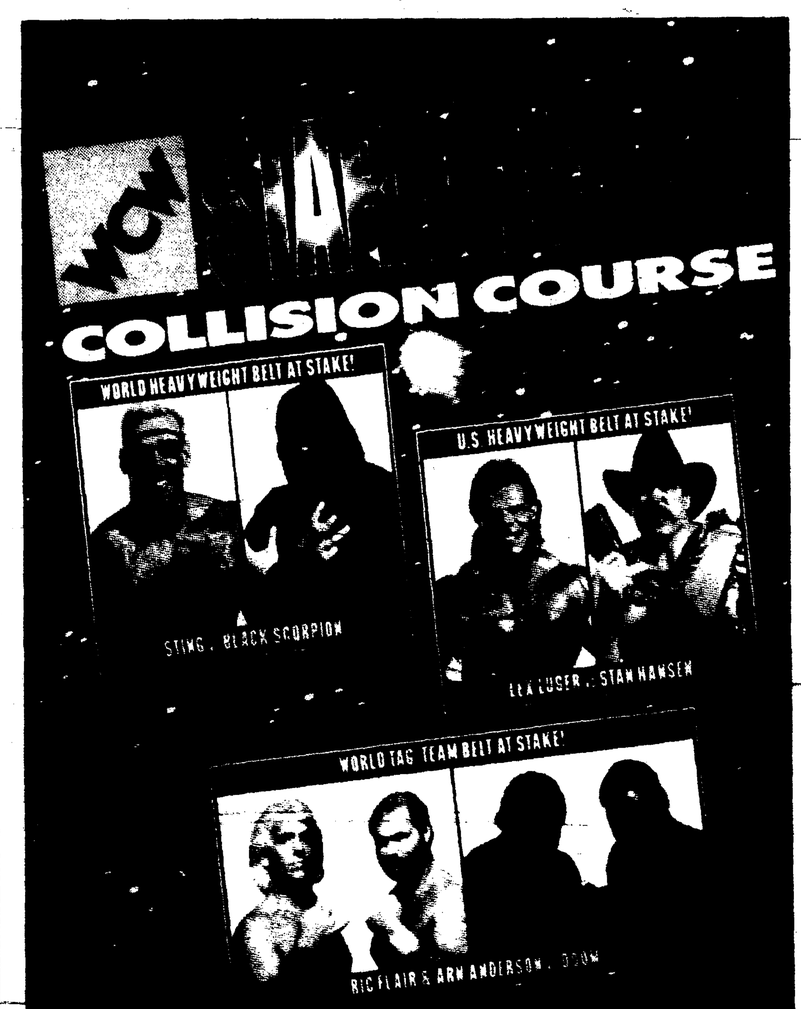

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